

## BRIEF SUMMARY REPORT

### Some alternative approaches in multilateral decision making: disarmament as humanitarian action

Wednesday 3 November 2004, Room IX, Palais des Nations,  
Geneva, 13:00-17:00

#### Summary of discussions

#### INTRODUCTION

Multilateral disarmament and arms control negotiation processes have experienced limited success in recent years. In recognizing the need for innovative approaches to reinvigorate multilateral efforts, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) recently launched a project entitled “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: Making Multilateral Negotiations Work”. This project is producing research with a view to coming up with new tools for multilateral decision-making processes. UNIDIR hosted a conference on 3 November 2004 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva to introduce the project and present some initial ideas on the following themes:

1. The relevance of humanitarian and “human security” perspectives to moving the arms control and disarmament agenda forward;
2. The arms control and disarmament negotiating machinery, its procedures and working practice.

#### HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVES AND DISARMAMENT AND ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATIONS

The meeting’s presenters observed that the arms control and disarmament community has been slow to adapt to the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of the current international security environment. The concept of “human security” has merits in constructively linking disarmament to an array of disciplines that are often neglected in

traditional state security discussions. For instance, “public health” perspectives had relevance to arms control and disarmament processes, as shown by the work of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in understanding armed violence as a health problem.

Various difficulties were noted in using differing conceptions of “human security” in arms control and disarmament. These included problems of definition, and reluctance by some governments to lend credence to an approach they fear might undermine national security concerns. Moreover, it was noted that the international direction since the 11 September 2001 attacks and the prosecution of the subsequent “war on terror” had seen human security sidelined to some extent. Good work had been done using human security concepts, however, including the Commission on Sovereignty’s work on the “responsibility to protect”. The upcoming report of the United Nations High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Threats was also expected to be interesting in this regard.

Despite these challenges in “operationalizing” humanitarian and human security concepts into multilateral negotiators’ practice, several of the panelists stressed the need for work in this area. Bridging this divide, it was thought by the panelists, would help in linking individual rights, humanitarianism and disarmament in beneficial ways. One participant also noted subtle differences between the use of “human security” and terms such as “humanitarianism”; the latter sometimes criticized for assuming moral high ground in complex human situations. At the same time, orthodox, realist notions of “national” or “state” security were, alone, increasingly insufficient on their own to tackle increasingly complex and multifaceted security problems. “Human security” could have utility, therefore, in allowing discourse in disarmament and arms control to have a more objective basis on which to assess issues of international security.

#### **RE-EVALUATING THE MULTILATERAL NEGOTIATING MACHINERY**

The importance of existing multilateral negotiating machinery to the practice of effective negotiation was discussed at length, especially explanations for difficulties in terms of insufficient political will. A range of views emerged. A few participants argued that specific methods and practices are of little or no consequence to the outcome of negotiations. Instead, success is dependent on the desire of all participants to achieve a

positive result. Others argued that such explanations couched in terms of political will have limited explanatory power at best, and are often tautologies. Political will was not necessarily definable or distinct from the processes it apparently infused. Nor did participants agree on whether or how political will could be generated in the midst of a negotiating process. If political will could not be defined except by its perceived effects then it was difficult to tell whether political was all that was necessary, or whether other factors, such as the structure and practices of negotiation also had a bearing. If these latter factors did, as some of the panelists believed, then removing structural impediments could make multilateral negotiations more likely to achieve effective outcomes with limited political attention and resource.

#### EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF PARTICIPATION

It was noted that, compared with many other fields of multilateral activity, some disarmament arms control processes lacked civil society involvement. At the same time, transnational civil society involvement raised a host of issues, one panelist noted. Although civil society engagement in processes such as the 1997 Antipersonnel Mine Ban Convention had been extensive and positive, there were other cases (such as tobacco control treaty negotiations) when NGOs had at times risked calling their independence or credibility into question and this might even have been to the detriment of the consensus building process. Several participants agreed that it was quite difficult to generalize about NGO characteristics: the small arms process, for instance, had revealed a wide range of NGO views on private firearm possession by civilians, for instance. More analysis needed to be done to understand the NGO impacts on negotiations, which could vary in specific instances.

It was also noted that while transnational civil society represented a form of world public conscience it was still predominantly a Western phenomenon. In some countries truly independent civil society voices had yet to be manifested. Their absence in some domestic political cultures had resulted in resistance to civil society participation in arms control and disarmament negotiations. Discussions also underscored the need for international cooperation and benchmark setting within the NGO community to allow for their more effective engagement with states and to optimize the chances of their concerns and opinions being voiced effectively at the decision-making level.

During the course of discussions participants raised the issue of the engagement of the humanitarian community in arms control and disarmament processes. There was recognition that there was currently a persistent degree of disconnection between these two communities resulting in limited awareness of the other's work. If practitioners in these fields were to interact with each other in a meaningful way there needed to be more information-sharing, it was suggested.

#### **ANALYSING THE ROLES OF EXISTING PARTICIPANTS IN MULTILATERAL NEGOTIATION PROCESSES**

Attention was paid to difficulties in analysing the roles of multilateral negotiating practitioners from outside the processes in which they operated. This was not solely a question of insufficient transparency (although this too was an issue in processes such as the Conference on Disarmament). However transparent a negotiating process was to those outside, it could be expected that endgame negotiating would be done privately between governmental representatives. Individual negotiators were usually neither plenipotentiary nor passive mouthpieces of the states they represented, but on a spectrum in various places in between. Individual negotiators, it was observed, often could and do a lot to influence the policies and positions of their respective governments and sometimes those of others. This was something that needed to be explored further, it was thought.

#### **OTHER POINTS**

There appeared to be a general feeling that new and innovative approaches were needed to address current problems in arms control and disarmament. It was observed that while many governments had stated the need to "think outside the box" in terms of making multilateral processes in this domain more effective, this had not necessarily translated into many specific improvements and it was noted that the disarmament as humanitarian project could have a role to play there.

It was also observed that there remained lack of agreement over what features of multilateral disarmament and arms control constituted problems and what action should be taken. Rules of procedure, for instance, were often problems for some actors in negotiations but not for others able to deploy them to their own advantage.

By the conclusion of discussions, the important function that multilateral disarmament and arms control institutions and negotiating processes played in the creation of international norms had been underscored.